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Protest and Political Incorporation: Vietnamese American Protests in Orange County, California, 1975–2001

For nearly four months, beginning in late December 1998 through mid-March 1999, Mr. Trường Trần, owner of the Hitek video store on Bolsa Avenue in Little Saigon, Westminster, California, the largest Vietnamese ethnic enclave in America, displayed a portrait of Hồ Chí Minh and a communist flag of Vietnam in his store. Releasing news of his display to local ethnic media, he invited an ongoing protest. For fifty-three days, Vietnamese American people paraded in front of his store to demand he remove the flag and the portrait; he refused. At one point, police counted at least fifteen thousand protesters in front of the store.

The so-called Hitek incident raises fundamental questions about the nature of protest politics in the Vietnamese American community and, indeed, among immigrant populations more generally. Because protest has become ubiquitous in advanced industrialized societies (Meyer and Tarrow 1998), it provides a useful window for understanding broader political phenomena. In this article, we examine the protests staged by the Vietnamese American community in Orange County as a means to explore the development of the politics and political incorporation of this group. We begin by looking at the routinization and institutionalization of protest as a means of making claims. We then look at theories of the political incorporation of

immigrants. After reviewing our data and methods, we report findings from newspaper reports of protests in this community in terms of location, periodicity, issues, tactics, and constituencies. We consider what these findings suggest about the political incorporation of Vietnamese immigrants in America, as well as what this tells us about the political process of protest more generally.

Protest in America and the Social Movement Society

Increasingly, scholars see social movements in general and protest in particular as extensions of more conventional politics, that is, as an additional means for any constituency to make political claims (e.g., Tilly 1984). Whereas protest was once seen as the province of those poorly positioned for effective action through mainstream politics (e.g., Lipsky 1970; Piven & Cloward 1977), this is no longer the case. Protest as a political tactic has diffused across a range of constituencies and claims in the United States and Europe, and in general, people who protest are likely to engage in conventional political activity on the same issues, including writing to elected officials, contributing money and time to campaigns, voting, and running for office (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). Both contributing to and resulting from this diffusion is an increased tolerance for protest, so that engaging in political protest is less frequently stigmatized (Dalton 2002).

Protest has become more common for several reasons. The social movements of the 1960s not only legitimated the tactic but also demonstrated its potential efficacy. The civil rights movement, particularly, successfully employed extrainstitutional protest to help African Americans make political gains (e.g., McAdam 1982; Morris 1984). Moreover, protest can offer clear benefits as part of a larger political strategy, producing benefits beyond enhancing political leverage to influence policy. At once, colorful protests are more attractive to mass media than less dramatic political action (see Gitlin 1980), allowing a relatively small group to project its concerns to a larger audience. Organizing a protest event is also one way to build an organization and to instill feelings of political efficacy and collective identity among participants. Beyond the instrumental impact of a protest event, participation in assertive action can help individuals maintain the commitment to continue their efforts in other ways (e.g., J. Gamson 1989; W.A. Gamson 1992;

Gould 2002). Staging a protest provides a test of commitment among members of a group, as well as a means of socializing and encouraging them. Protest is also a means of winning political recognition and relevance for an otherwise excluded community. This is surely the case for movements of ethnic minorities and other often marginalized groups (W.A. Gamson 1990). For immigrants, particularly those from repressive states such as Vietnam or Cuba, the relative tolerance offered to protesters by authorities in the United States is likely to provide an attractive contrast to the politics of their homeland. Protest demonstrates not only the openness of American politics but also, by contrast, the repressive nature of the regimes they fled.

Protest has also become more common because it is harder for any group to achieve political influence through mainstream politics alone. Increased political polarization in American politics, coupled with a long-established system of separation of powers, means that such difficulties are widespread; frequently groups on both sides of an issue resort to protest as part of their political strategy even as they cultivate allies within mainstream politics (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). For a relatively small immigrant community, unlikely to win much by lobbying or running candidates for office, protest represents a strategy that demonstrates political concerns and commitment, and it offers the promise of keeping an issue alive while building support and organizational strength and searching for better political opportunities. Protest can build solidarity, providing a focal point for organizations that lack good prospects for making progress in other ways and maintaining connections within the networks they use for mobilization (McAdam and Paulsen 1993).

Protest offers a window into the politics of a community, reflecting not only political frustration but also organizational and political capacity. Mobilization networks developed through protest can be employed in other political actions and can provide an orientation to American politics for new constituencies. And studying protest provides a new and different way of looking at immigrant incorporation.

Immigration and Political Incorporation

Earlier models of incorporation posited the wholesale transformation, over a period of generations, of immigrants into generic Americans with few identifiable ethnic interests or behaviors. For example, Dahl (1962) described

political incorporation as a function of mobilization into conventional party politics. Based on his classic study of politics in New Haven, Connecticut, Dahl offered a simple three-stage framework of ethnic incorporation. In the first stage, immigrants are not engaged in politics, lacking both the know-how and the resources—including the vote—to be useful politically. In the second stage, ethnic communities mobilize en bloc in party politics, with a recognizable and mobilizable ethnic identity providing sufficient resources to broker patronage. Residential segregation facilitates both mobilization and brokerage. In the third and, in Dahl's view, final stage, interests within the ethnic community become sufficiently diverse to make such brokerage no longer viable, and ethnic identity no longer politically relevant.

For Dahl, political incorporation rests on individual assimilation and participation based on individual, rather than collective, interests. Lessened discrimination and increased education and economic wealth allow individuals to gain access to mainstream social institutions, politics, and occupations, so that their ethnic identity becomes less salient. Dahl's model of incorporation "worked" for white ethnic communities in New Haven long ago, but not, as he recognized, for African Americans, who were either unable or unwilling to shed the collective identity and concerns of their community. There is reason to believe his model is also inapplicable to more recent immigrants to the United States.

Recognizing that ethnic identities remain long after formal political inclusion has occurred, scholars of ethnic politics have more recently defined political incorporation narrowly, in terms of naturalization and voting (e.g., Junn 1999; Lien 1997). Particularly in a multiethnic country like the United States, the tendency to employ the narrowest interpretation of incorporation makes methodological sense; we can track when immigrants begin voting and become naturalized citizens, when they take an oath of allegiance to a new nation, and thereby avoid dealing with more complicated and difficult issues of identity and interests (Andersen and Cohen 2002). Engagement in domestic politics, however, is only one element of incorporation. Indeed, in looking at Asian American politics, scholars have observed a shift from nonparticipation and occasional protests toward more conventional forms of participation, such as voting (e.g., Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984), even while the content of politics has continued

to emphasize transnational policy making rather than domestic politics (Nakanishi 2003). A shift in modes of participation, then, does not necessarily accompany a shift in concerns. Scholars of immigration (e.g., Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Portes and Zhou 1993) have also identified more complicated and variegated pattern of incorporation, termed "segmented assimilation," which recognizes that there are a variety of cultures into which immigrants can assimilate and that various aspects of immigrant life can be separated into more and less assimilated spheres of engagement.

Whereas Dahl saw initial political engagement as a function of partisan mobilization by brokers, Sterne (2001) found that mobilization may have indigenous origins and payoffs, starting within the immigrant community, that provide the source for brokerage and mobilization. Even if they have naturalized, more recent immigrants may never be fully assimilated or politically incorporated according to older definitions (DeSipio 2001). This is especially true for first-generation immigrants, who firmly retain their ethnic identity and pass it on to their children to continue the tradition (Gerstle and Mollenkopf 2001). And ethnic identity is partly defined by a set of political concerns.

Recent literature, hence, reflects the trend in reconceptualizing the notion of political incorporation (e.g., A. Ong 1999). The immigrants' political issues may have little to do with mainstream American politics and tend to be homeward looking (Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992). Indeed, many ethnic groups maintain a distinct transnational collective politics, particularly on issues of foreign policy, while pursuing individual interests in domestic politics (Morawska 2001; Guarnizo 2001). Organizations of American Jews, for example, despite generations of residence in the United States, still work to influence American policy toward Israel (Jacobson 1995). Especially with recent immigrants, there is some tendency to use immigrant communities as outposts for politics directed toward the homeland's domestic politics, as in the cases of Cuba and Korea. Organized Cuban immigrants continue their efforts against the Castro regime and communism in their homeland, lobbying US officials and broadcasting antiregime programs—even financing, in the 1980s, anticommunist struggles abroad (Boswell and Curtis 1984; Portes and Rumbaut 1996). They have been largely successful in preventing the

normalization of relations between the United States and the Castro regime, keeping the issue available and urgent within segments of the Cuban American community, which play a critical role in state and national politics. In contrast, organized Korean American activities are directed both to promote unity within this immigrant community and to enhance the United States–Korea relationship; they have received moral and financial sponsorship from the sending country (Kim 1981).

On the one hand, an overemphasis on foreign policy can distort a community's politics and inhibit its effectiveness on more tractable and immediate domestic issues (Browning et al. 1984). An international focus can lead the immigrant community into political alliances with elected officials who do not share the community's perspectives on domestic issues; further, resources directed to foreign policy are not available for domestic issues. Because substantive foreign policy is made at a federal level, focus on international concerns directs a community to venues in which it is least likely to be effective. Such a focus may also generate the extension of great efforts to win gains that are primarily symbolic, generating few resources for subsequent political work. On the other hand, these "homeland political concerns" can serve as a vehicle for politicizing and mobilizing new citizens on a variety of issues, building indigenous organizations and external alliances. Engagement in foreign policy also acts as a holder for a collective identification.

Besides homeward concerns, resilient ethnicity is another factor preventing total assimilation: "[W]hen immigrant communities finally turn to domestic issues and the vote, they tend to mobilize along national rather than class lines" (Portes and Rumbaut 1996, 125). Although pan-Asian movements sometimes emerge (Espiritu 1992), a gap separates the experience of most immigrants from that of political refugees (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). Most Korean immigrants, for instance, are markedly different from Vietnamese refugees in their causes for leaving the country, their socioeconomic status, and their cultures.

General models of political incorporation oversimplify the experiences of different immigrant groups, which differ as a function of timing, context, and culture. By looking at protest, we can see the emergent concerns of a community as well as its connections to more conventional political events. We now turn to the Vietnamese experience in the United States.

The Vietnamese American Community

Most Vietnamese people arrived in the United States after 1975, when South Vietnam fell, producing three distinct main waves of refugees (Allen and Turner 1997; Gold 1992; Do 1999). Excluding the few immigrants prior to 1975, the first wave was largely composed of refugees of relatively high socioeconomic status, the political elite, and employees in the US-supported Republic of Vietnam in the south. This first group of refugees, comprising about one hundred fifty thousand people, left Vietnam mostly to avoid political persecution by the communist-controlled government (Allen and Turner 1997). Vietnamese people continued to emigrate after 1975 in search of better political and economic opportunities (Allen and Turner 1997; Do 1999). Until the 1990s, Vietnamese and Chinese Vietnamese escaped their country mostly by boat or by land through one of the neighboring countries, gaining admission to the United States with political or religious refugee status, or by sponsorship from relatives already living in the United States. These "boat people" survived severe hardships, including attacks by pirates, loss of loved ones, starvation, and torture in the refugee camps (Do 1999). This "second wave," from 1978 to 1981, marked the peak of immigrant flow from Vietnam to the United States (Allen and Turner 1997). Included in this wave were three hundred thousand Chinese Vietnamese who were forced out by the Vietnamese government, which confiscated their properties (Tran 2001). By 2000, nearly three hundred ninety thousand refugees had been admitted into the United States (SEARAC 2003).

Reacting to the refugees' dangerous flights, the United States and other countries established programs to admit refugees directly from Vietnam. In the 1980s, immigrants began arriving through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP), by which refugees were sponsored by relatives. Most came without much property. With government assistance, however, they resettled in the United States and most eventually became economically self-sufficient.

A more recent wave of Vietnamese immigrants arrived in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. These refugees immigrated through the Humanitarian Program and the Amerasian Program, part of the American government's effort to compensate its South Vietnamese allies after the war. By 1998, the Humanitarian Program had given one hundred eighty thousand former South Vietnamese Army soldiers, officers, and their families a

chance to resettle in the United States after their imprisonment by the communist government. The Amerasian Program sought to care for neglected children of American soldiers born during the war, bringing about eighty-four thousand Amerasians and accompanying relatives to the United States. The ODP qualified approximately three hundred sixty-two thousand immigrants to be reunited with their refugee relatives (Tran 2001).

The 2000 US Census reports approximately 1.2 million Vietnamese living in the United States (US Census Bureau 2004). This group is highly mobile, and an estimated one hundred fifty Vietnamese have resettled in Orange County. Since 1982, the Vietnamese people of Orange County have built and maintained an ethnic enclave called Little Saigon, considered "the capital of the Vietnamese in exile" (Brody 1987) and now home to several thousand businesses and various cultural activities (Do 1999).

The Vietnamese in the United States are economically among the fastest developing Asian immigrant groups in the United States. Between 1990 and 2000, the median family income for Vietnamese nearly doubled, reaching $47,000, nearly $5,000 higher than the median income for all families. Over the same period, the percentage of Vietnamese below the poverty level fell by about 10 percent, to 14.3 percent, a little higher than the rate for all people (11.3 percent) (US Census Bureau 2004).

The economic status of the Vietnamese community in the United States affects political affiliation in complicated ways. During the earlier years of resettlement, strong anticommunism translated into a more conservative political identity (Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce in Orange County 1991b). However, more Vietnamese now register as Democrats or independents than as Republicans. This does not reflect party switching so much as the fact that younger people and newer immigrants are registering with different loyalties than the first, well-established wave of immigrants. About half of Vietnamese Americans now place themselves at the center of the liberal-conservative spectrum (Lien, Collet, Wong, and Ramakrishnan 2001).

Political Participation among Vietnamese Americans

US foreign policy toward the Pacific Rim nations, especially Vietnam, plays a central role in Vietnamese American political participation (Watanabe 2001). In a 2000 poll conducted for the *Orange County Register*, an overwhelming

majority of six hundred Vietnamese Americans in Orange County ranked fighting communism as "top priority" or "very important" (Collet 2000). Homeland concerns were particularly salient for the older generation, as shown in another poll by the *San Jose Mercury News* (Collet and Selden 2003). Identifying as refugees, many claim plans to return to Vietnam when democracy is established. Indeed, for the Vietnamese in Orange County, fully 62 percent of those responding to another survey expressed the hope of one day returning to Vietnam (Brody, Rimmer, and Trotter 2000). Many Vietnamese also maintain regular contacts with their homeland (Lien et al. 2001).

Many of the standard predictors for voting behavior do not hold for Asian Americans; scholars of political participation argue that voter registration and turnout are poor indicators of what Asian Americans are actually doing politically, finding that Asian Americans are more likely than other immigrant groups to engage in a broader variety of modes of participation, including social protests, coalition building, campaign donations, and lobbying (Cain, Kiewiet, and Uhlaner 1991; Cho 1999; Lien 2001; Brackman and Erie 2003). Therefore, to understand Asian American participation and incorporation, it helps to look at other political activities.

Because most Vietnamese Americans immigrated in the past thirty years, Vietnamese political incorporation is still at a relatively early stage. Moreover, most Vietnamese American people are subject to the dynamic process of acculturation, as suggested by Barkan (1995), whereby they absorb certain aspects of the mainstream culture, reject some completely, and bargain on some others to fit into the new society (Portes and Zhou 1993). This process of acculturation includes political socialization. The Vietnamese have gradually assimilated into American democracy, voting and engaging in mainstream electoral politics, and they have begun to win elective office.

In 1992, the Vietnamese of Westminster, California, helped elect Tony Lâm as the first Vietnamese American to the city council. Because the number of Vietnamese eligible and willing to go to the polls is rarely enough to win elections, even in an ethnic enclave, Vietnamese candidates for office, like other Asian candidates, generally have to appeal to "mainstream" (non-Asian) voters and run as "crossover" candidates (Lai, Cho, Kim,

and Takeda 2001). For instance, Châu Minh Nguyễn became the first Vietnamese councilwoman in Garrett Park, Maryland, a town with few Vietnamese, in 1995. On the other hand, in the city of Garden Grove, California, candidates like Văn Thái Trần (city council member, first elected in 2000) and Lân Quốc Nguyễn (trustee on Board of Education, first elected in 2002) were able to rally support from the Vietnamese residents who make up the majority of the city's population. Recent elections of Kim-Oanh Nguyễn-Lâm and Trung Quang Nguyễn to the Garden Grove Unified School District in November 2004 gave the majority on the Board of Education to Vietnamese Americans for the first time. In the same elections, Văn Thái Trần (Republican, California) became one of the first two Vietnamese American assemblymen in the United States; the other one was Hubert Võ (Democrat, Texas).

But Vietnamese political participation has run the gamut from conventional to unconventional activities, including dramatic protest events ranging from boycotts and demonstrations to assassinations of individual reporters, bomb attacks, and self-immolation. Among Vietnamese, participating in demonstrations is by far the most popular mode of political participation (Lien et al. 2001), followed closely by voting, according to the *Orange County Register* poll (Collet 2000)—inverting the pattern established by other groups. Participating in demonstrations does not require citizenship, registration, or more developed civic skills; in some ways it is easier for immigrants, who only have to get to the event and follow instructions (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Asians have become quite familiar with this form of political action since the beginning of their resettlement history in America (Lien 2001). Vietnamese immigrants, particularly the older cohorts, experienced or participated in protests during the most recent war, which ended in 1975. Hence, it is quite conspicuous that protest plays a central role in many of the Vietnamese political demands and expressions of grievances. In other words, for Vietnamese Americans, protest can be a familiar first step in engaging American politics. At the same time, it also represents a process of adopting and adapting well-established tactics for political influence in the United States. The demonstration, then, offers both novelty (because of its context) and familiarity.

Data and Methods

To examine the political protests of Vietnamese Americans, we employed events data analysis of newspaper reports and interviews. To generate a sample of political activities across America, we used the LexisNexis Academic Universe and the *Orange County Register* search engines to locate articles containing keywords "Vietnamese" and "protest" from 1975 to 2001 in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Orange County Register*.

Relevant information for each event was extracted from these articles and coded. Descriptions of events duplicated in different newspapers were compared, and any disparities were resolved by choosing the most specific details reported, so that each event was coded only once with the following categories: date, source, actors, targets, leaders, locations, issues, positions/demands, tactics, number of participants, duration, and outcomes. To take into account all the characteristics of an event as listed, events were coded not only by length (i.e., number of days per event) but by all the intersecting characteristics that composed an event. This process yielded a total of 209 events taking place across the United States, of which 135 events, or more than half of the total, took place in Orange County (Ong and Meyer 2004). Although the larger sample does not appreciably differ from the subset from Orange County, the ethnic enclave of Little Saigon provides additional resources for examining the politics of Vietnamese American protest.

Using American newspapers to generate events for analysis is a well-established, if controversial, method in the study of social movements (e.g., Jenkins and Perrow 1977; Kriesi, Koopmans, Duyvendak, and Giugni 1995; Koopmans 1998; McAdam 1982; Mueller 1997a; Oliver and Maney 2000; Oliver and Myers 1999; Olzak 1989; Rucht 1998; Rucht, Koopmans, and Neidhardt 1999; Snyder and Kelly 1977; Tarrow 1989). The approach offers the advantage of being able to have a replicable, quantifiable measurement of observed mobilization over time. At the same time, the approach also entails certain limits: only a small portion of events that occur are covered in newspapers (McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996; Swank 2000), and coverage of any individual event can be influenced by both political circumstances and journalistic norms (Gitlin 1980; Tuchman 1976). Most substantially, coverage is biased in favor of more disruptive and

larger events (McCarthy et al. 1996). While acknowledging such limits, we feel that these data nonetheless represent an unmatched source for tracking large changes in mobilization over time and for comparing movement strategies (Danzinger 1975, 1976; Oliver and Maney 2001; Mueller 1997b; Olzak 1989; Rucht and Neidhardt 1999; Rucht and Olemacher 1992).

Another limitation is that mainstream English-language papers may not be able to assess the multifaceted activities of Vietnamese American actors, particularly in an ethnic enclave. Indeed, coverage of ethnic groups in mainstream media is generally biased toward food, crime, and festivals. As a result, political activities within the community may be underreported because they do not fit the stereotypical editorial framework. We chose to use newspaper accounts, cognizant of these risks. While Vietnamese language papers would provide additional and presumably more comprehensive sources of information, there is presently no long-standing, well-indexed Vietnamese language paper in the United States.

Events data also provide a reasonably reliable means of comparing observable protest actions over time. We are particularly interested in who did what, when, and why. Events data help answer the first two questions. To supplement the newspaper accounts and to perform more in-depth analyses, we conducted semistructured interviews with seven key protest leaders throughout the months of July and August 2002. (All interview subjects asked to remain anonymous.) The leaders were selected because they were identified in the relevant newspaper articles. To be sure, mass media are not a foolproof source of information on leadership within social movement campaigns. Indeed, in some large movements, media-anointed leaders developed interests apart from the groups they purportedly led (e.g., Gitlin 1980). That acknowledged, it appears that because the Vietnamese immigrants who have staged protests comprise a relatively small group, relationships among protest organizers and participants have been fairly stable, as has been media coverage of them. In interviews, we inquired about other leaders and about the relationship of those interviewed to the larger community involved in generating the protest. In fact, we found that the production of protests was a fairly entrepreneurial activity, in

which committed organizers invested a great deal of time and effort to generate events. We certainly may have missed some organizers. But based on these and other inquiries in the community, we doubt that our method generated false positives—that is, we doubt that it identified "organizers" who did not, in fact, organize.

Findings

TYPES OF PROTESTS

The Vietnamese in America have employed diverse means to express their political concerns. We categorized four mutually exclusive types of protest activity along categories drawn from the literature on political contention (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001): demonstrations, symbolic or educational activities, transgressive actions, and institutionally oriented actions (Figure 1). Demonstrations were most frequently reported, comprising nearly half the total number of events. The second most frequently reported category was educational and symbolic activities, which ranged from making a public statement to organizing a concert (e.g., the September 2000 Rock-A-Vote concert to help Vietnamese register for the November elections). Transgressive actions came third and included nonviolent transgression of law, self-immolation, violent action, calls to defect, hunger strike, and verbal threat. Institutional actions, including letter-writing campaigns and lobbying, were least frequently reported, reflecting both journalistic norms and the balance of political activities.

Organization-building activities and monetary donations were also reported relatively infrequently. Because newspapers are generally unlikely to cover such events, however, the absence of reports does not mean that such activities did not take place. Indeed, the number of Vietnamese-led mutual assistance associations is higher than that for any other ethnic group or pan-ethnic group in California. The 2003 Directory of Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs) lists 148 organizations, 46 of which are Vietnamese-led compared to 23 serving Laotians; 14, Cambodians; and 29, pan-ethnic (Office of Refugee Settlement, California Department of Social Services). In addition, we know of at least a dozen more Vietnamese MAAs and numerous religious or political organizations that
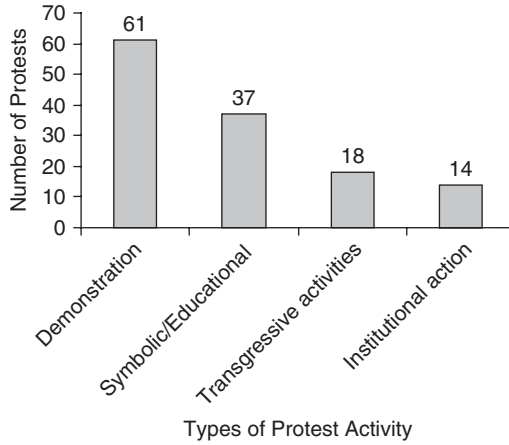
FIGURE 1: Number of Vietnamese American protest activities, by type, in Orange County, California, 1975–2001.

SOURCE: Authors' data compilation.

are not registered with the state of California and thus not listed in the directory.

FREQUENCY AND LOCATIONS OF PROTESTS

Our data show Vietnamese people protesting only occasionally from 1975 until the late 1980s. The reported pattern of protest suggests that during the early years of residence in the United States, immigrants were busy establishing themselves rather than making political claims. Protest then emerged, along with other forms of social and economic incorporation. There is also the issue of geographic concentration. When Vietnamese immigrants initially arrived, they were dispersed across the country, reflecting the diverse locations of sponsors. This dispersion also reflected an explicit federal immigration policy that intended to speed assimilation to mainstream culture and to obviate the development of ethnic enclaves. Over a relatively brief period, however, Vietnamese moved together and formed larger ethnic communities. The major interstate migration took place
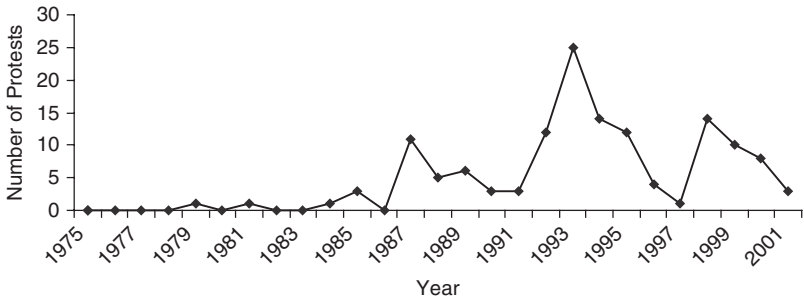
FIGURE 2: Number of Vietnamese American protests, per year, in Orange County, California, 1975–2001.

SOURCE: Authors' data compilation.

during the 1980s, so by the mid 1980s immigrants had established several relatively large and coherent ethnic communities, most notably in Orange County (Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce in Orange County 1991a).

By the late 1980s, with the increasing concentration of Vietnamese American populations and the rise of relevant political issues to be addressed, protests increased in frequency to a peak in 1993 (Figure 2), during the debate about normalizing relations with Vietnam. The number of protests fell after the US decision to normalize relations.

During interviews, protest organizers confirmed that Orange County's Little Saigon surfaced as a clear choice of location when organizing events because of the very high concentration of Vietnamese there. Hence, Little Saigon was the place from which most identifiable Vietnamese American protest activity came. Indeed, more than two-thirds ($n = 92$) of the protests reported took place in the city of Westminster, the center of Little Saigon (Figure 3). The concentration of protests in the city of Westminster supports the notion that increased protest came from the establishment of a Vietnamese community large enough to support political action when political grievances existed. Little Saigon provided not only a safe and defined territory for Vietnamese in America but also a locus for organizing political action.
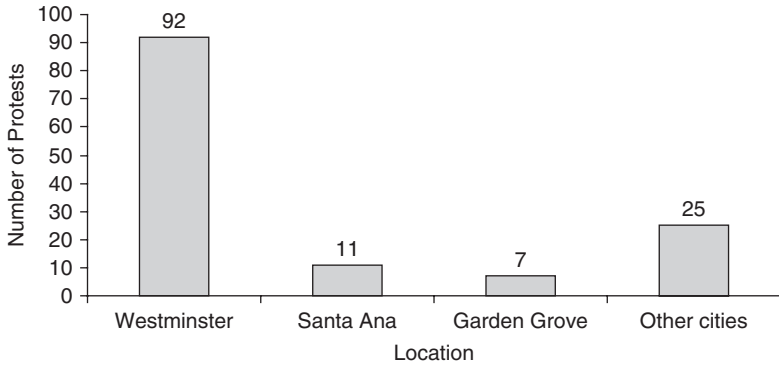
FIGURE 3: Location of Vietnamese American protests in Orange County, California, 1975–2001.

SOURCE: Authors' data compilation.

PROTEST LEADERS

The newspaper accounts of the protests we studied identified protest leaders and frequently interviewed them, providing direct access to information on how organizers think about what they are doing. Most protests were reported as being organized by individuals rather than by organizations, religious leaders, or government officials (Figure 4). Given the large number of formal and informal associations in Vietnamese American communities, it is possible that the reporting understated the role that established organizations played in staging protest, repeatedly identifying a relatively small number of individuals as protest leaders.

We also interviewed protest leaders in a preliminary attempt to lend some depth to the newspaper data. The additional information obtained from the interviews helped us understand how these leaders viewed their political actions and leadership. Unless they belonged to a religious group or represented an organization with substantial membership, the leaders were eager to claim credit for organizing protests, and older activists (over 40 years old) often emphasized their own leadership role at the expense of any organization. However, younger leaders (under 40 years old) often gave credit to groups they worked with. Younger leaders also tended to view older leaders as being motivated by a variety of interests beyond pure service to the community.
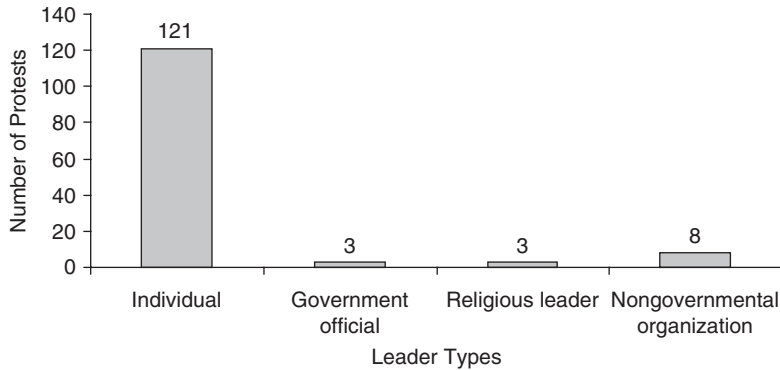
FIGURE 4: Identified leaders of Vietnamese American protests in Orange County, California, 1975–2001.

SOURCE: Authors' data compilation.

Young leaders affirmed themselves as having more legitimacy as event organizers because of their integrity and their spirit of community service, discrediting the older generation as being self-serving. As one younger activist noted,

> I think with the older people in the community, there's always something pushing them, a different goal, more than what they represent them-selves. . . . That's why the power struggle in the community is so great. It's not just individuals vying for power; it's what behind them that's vying for authority. . . . They all have a common goal of free Vietnam, but different egos, different ways of doing things. . . . That's why older people can't get along. That's why you see so much disunity. . . . I think young people are a lot more efficient at doing things because we don't think about our inter-ests; we only want to do good for the community. . . . We're not seeking power; we're not seeking authority; we're not seeking any other interests other than the issues we're serving at that time or the events that we're putting on. Our interest is the success of those events, and that's it. I think when it gets into power, or money, or fame, that's what destroys our community.

One leader defined leadership concretely as having the background knowledge about the community, the ability to network and organize various groups with different political dispositions, and the strategies to make an event successful. Leaders defined the success of an event as meeting their proposed objectives, which may include making their voices heard through

both Vietnamese and American media, rallying large crowds to support their causes, and reinforcing the spirit of teamwork. Older leaders were particularly concerned about the effectiveness of an event in terms of turnout, media coverage, and political ramifications. The younger leaders were also interested in concrete results, such as media coverage and the level of effectiveness of a political action, but they considered such outcomes to be extraneous returns. Instead, they emphasized the usefulness of protest activities as opportunities for leadership training and organization building.

The younger leaders were skeptical of general assertions about important community-wide issues, whereas older leaders claimed certain knowledge of community interests and wishes. One respondent in his fifties expressed this sentiment clearly: "I can affirm that [among] all the Vietnamese abroad, even [those] with a settled life and successful children, their hearts and minds are devoted fully to patriotic causes. So whenever communists appear and evoke pains, all the people express their attitudes" [translated from Vietnamese].

When asked to identify which issues were important to the community, all but one respondent emphasized improving the conditions of people in Vietnam. The younger generation of leaders did not express anticommunist sentiment as adamantly as the older ones, but they still felt the need to orient their political actions toward Vietnam. More importantly, the younger generation's activism vis-à-vis Vietnam may transcend the traditional boundary between communists and noncommunists. The "new" attitude is well reflected in the words of one respondent: "My love for the Vietnamese people will always be greater than my hatred for communism. . . . Governments, regimes, that's just something on the side." All of the protest leaders addressed their efforts to homeward-looking issues while trying to balance this with the other concerns of the Vietnamese Americans living in the United States.

PROTEST ISSUES

Over nearly thirty years and more than one hundred protests, a few recurrent issues appear in the data, almost all directed at the government of Vietnam. American politics is often relevant only to the extent that the United States makes policies regarding Vietnam. As seen in Table 1, the majority of the

Vietnam-related issues fit in this broader frame. Protests targeted themes such as human rights abuse, one-way art exchange, and the lack of democracy in Vietnam. Two salient issues came to organize much of the protest occurring over the last two decades. First, in the 1980s, the treatment of boat people was central to Vietnamese politics in the United States. Activists staged demonstrations in front of the consulates of various governments to pressure their leaders to accept more Vietnamese refugees and to raise awareness about abuses in refugee camps. Second, in the early part of the 1990s, the debate about normalizing relations with Vietnam provided the focal point for Vietnamese protest politics. Supporters of a continued embargo gathered to protest the lack of democracy and human rights abuses in Vietnam, arguing that the government had not yet earned the "reward" of bilateral trade. Protests on the same theme would occur whenever there were visits from Vietnamese officials, formation of sister-city ties with Vietnam, local art exhibitions or performances by Vietnamese artists, and similar events. Annual political events were also occasions for making such claims, notably the commemoration of the fall of Saigon on April 30, Human Rights Day on December 10, and the anniversary of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam on June 19. Importantly, such events continued even *after* the foreign policy decision to normalize relations had been made.

Other protests, stemming from conflicts in the Vietnamese American community, were also rooted in differences over Vietnam-related issues.

TABLE ONE:

Newspaper Coverage of Protest Issues, Orange County, California, 1975–2001

	Protest Issues						
Newspaper Coverage	Vietnamese Politics	US-Vietnam Relations	US-Vietnam Arts Exchange	Viet Boat People	Vietnamese American Politics	US Politics	Misc.
Frequency of protests (N = 134)	25	31	5	10	44	17	2
Percentage of total protests	18%	23%	4%	7%	33%	13%	2%

SOURCE: Authors' data compilation.

Lê Lý Hayslip, for example, who starred in Oliver Stone's film *Heaven and Earth*, generated protests when she visited Little Saigon. Cơ Phạm, a physician in Westminster, faced one month of demonstrations outside his office for publicly supporting United States–Vietnam bilateral trade. He then sued one of the protesters for videotaping his patients. Tony Lâm, then Westminster city council member, also faced a one-month long protest outside of his family's restaurant for not publicly opposing the Vietnamese flag display at at Trường Trần's Hitek video store in Westminster. Thus, even when activists targeted local issues or individuals, these targets were virtually always a proxy for the government of Vietnam.

Protests on purely domestic political issues were far less frequent. These events touched on the numerous issues common to immigrant life among Vietnamese in America, including welfare, racism, bilingual education, and laws governing local business practices. A smaller number of protests supported the appointment of Vietnamese to religious positions and the allocation of church funding for Vietnamese services. Although immigrant-related and mainstream political issues occasionally appeared, however, most protests dealt with politics thousands of miles away. In an ethnic enclave like Little Saigon, the number of homeward-looking protests overshadowed the relatively fewer protests dealing with immigrant issues.

The dual concern of Vietnam-related and immigrant-related issues was reflected clearly in the interviews with protest leaders. Six out of seven identified improving the lives both of Vietnamese immigrants in the United States and of the Vietnamese living in Vietnam as key issues on the political agenda for Vietnamese Americans. These leaders saw the need to use multiple methods of political engagement. Besides protests, they commented, there ought to be more Vietnamese running for office, voting, and engaging in other conventional modes of civic participation. As an experienced leader of many anticommunist protests asserted, by actively adopting more "mainstream" methods, Vietnamese Americans can have their voices heard on a number of issues, ranging from human rights concerns in Vietnam to local funding for education. This does not mean abandoning demonstrations or hunger strikes, however, he stressed; Vietnamese in America will need to mobilize through different tactics depending upon the issue.

Conclusion

In this article, we have looked at Vietnamese American protest activities in Orange County to explore what the pattern and content of protests can tell us about the process of Vietnamese American political incorporation. We have applied events data analysis to the issue of ethnic politics and incorporation, something that has not been done previously, and this gives us a fresh, albeit partial, look at Vietnamese American politics. As described, we saw that the ethnic enclave of Little Saigon was home to most of the protests, and that the most frequent target of protests was the government of Vietnam. While the development of a protest repertoire reflects some degree of incorporation, a growing familiarity with the norms and routines of contemporary American politics, it also reflects a strong dependence on the ethnic enclave and homeland issues. Interviews with protest leaders confirmed some aspects of the data, but leaders also expressed concerns about diversifying political tactics and serving the interests of the immigrant community. The data tend to skew toward demonstration as a primary activity against the backdrop of homeland politics, while not recognizing a wide range of political tactics used by the Vietnamese Americans (N.T. Ong 2005). Identified leaders were mostly passionate and committed individuals, rather than organizations—again undermining the notion that this community has experienced full political incorporation.

Protest issues have been overwhelmingly homeward looking, and the protests themselves have been unlikely to have direct political impact in Vietnam, aside from sending a symbolic message, and little direct impact at home aside from developing an organized base in the community. The success of the protests could be measured by determining whether they met the organizers' objectives, such as headcounts, the attraction of media coverage, the opportunity to exercise leadership as well as teamwork, and accomplishments in symbolic politics (N.T. Ong 2005). Furthermore, incidents of protest against Vietnamese Americans who served as proxies for the Vietnamese government focused on divisions within the community. Of course, such events can mobilize the faithful and build commitment among those who agree, but they can also exacerbate tensions within the community. In contrast to earlier models of immigrant incorporation, partisan registration and mobilization have become less significant and less uniform

in the Vietnamese American communities. Mobilized opinion on Vietnam and foreign policy remains fairly homogenous, even as individuals have achieved increasing success in education and the economy, and the community has diversified in other ways. This seems to reflect a kind of "segmented assimilation" (Portes and Zhou 1993), although the term has not previously been applied in such a context.

Whether or not the focus on homeland-oriented issues continues to serve Vietnamese American communities is an open question. On the one hand, this approach has done little to exercise influence on American national policy. Given the explicit defeat a decade ago on the primary issue of concern, namely, normalization of relations with Vietnam, focusing on homeward-looking issues may breed cynicism. To the extent that Vietnamese American politics is monopolized by issues on which direct impact by protest is unlikely and whose salience might be declining, the immigrant community will be underserved.

On the other hand, homeland-oriented politics helps maintain a Vietnamese ethnic identity, potentially unifying the community by reproducing wartime and refugee memories and, in a sense, establishing a strong collective ethnic and political identity. Homeward-looking politics has served as temporary deterrence to the Vietnamese state's effort to reincorporate the diasporic communities and, at the same time, may serve as a tool to preserve the history of South Vietnam, which has been actively erased by both the Vietnamese and the American governments after 1975 (Nguyễn-võ 2005).

Meanwhile, the second generation of Vietnamese in America has diversified the means for political involvement. Researchers have found indications that younger Vietnamese Americans are growing more interested in domestic politics (Collet and Selden 2003). Coupled with increased financial and political resources, the second generation may leave some parts of the politics of the homeland behind or may engage in more contemporary issues, reflecting the transnational flow of goods and people across the US-Vietnam borders, thereby becoming a significant political bloc in advocating policies benefiting immigrants, engaging a broader range of political issues, and contesting and winning larger numbers of political offices.

Yet old-style partisan mobilization and incorporation seem less likely, both for Vietnamese Americans and other ethnic groups (Wattenberg 2002). Such groups may be able to act effectively as an organized interest through lobbying, selective participation in political campaigns, and through alliances with other immigrant groups. If this is the case, participation in foreign policy–oriented protests may, as some protest leaders asserted, provide a foundation for subsequent, more varied political action, rather than being a distraction from it. Even if not influential in terms of policy, such protests can cultivate Vietnamese American identity, build political organizations, and provide civic education by offering political experience to individuals and constructing political organizations. Beyond the Vietnamese American community, however, the focus on Vietnam provides little incentive for other ethnic groups to cooperate politically.

These results are preliminary, and more research examining protest and political incorporation must be conducted on both Vietnamese Americans and other ethnic groups. Here, we have advanced an exploratory analysis to suggest issues and methodological approaches for further study. If, however, these conclusions hold and are applicable to other ethnic groups with strong ties to their homelands, the implied change in American politics in general will be significant. The basis for American political engagement would then be changing from partisan competition, which unifies diverse interests, to a more fragmented and contentious politics (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). Political incorporation for a new immigrant no longer means identification with a certain party and engagement in a patronage system for individual advancement; rather, incorporation and assimilation may now, paradoxically, be based around the cultivation and deployment of an ethnic identity. Protest may then be the first step in political incorporation to a more fragmented and contingent politics. ■

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ABSTRACT

Protest has become a useful window for examining all sorts of broader political phenomena. Using event data from newspaper reports, we trace protest by Vietnamese Americans since the first major wave of immigration. By looking at the issues, tactics, and development of protest within the Vietnamese American community in Orange County, California, we get a view of the development and incorporation of that community into contemporary American politics.

KEYWORDS: *Vietnamese American politics, protests, immigration politics, political incorporation*

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